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ABSTRACT

The Salt Lake City School District, Utah, has successfully involved the public in school improvement through cooperation with the local parent teacher associations (PTA). Four main beliefs foster district collaboration with the PTA: (1) the PTA can provide valuable human resources to public schools, (2) the PTA can participate in the decision-making process, (3) the PTA can make a difference in quality education, and (4) the PTA can positively influence the lives of children. These beliefs have allowed the PTA groups within the district to develop innovative school improvement programs at the elementary and secondary levels. The most difficult element in developing these active PTA programs was overcoming traditional beliefs that educators are experts and parents have little to offer schools. Four things are necessary to revise these traditional attitudes. First, a philosophy of cooperation must be communicated by the district. Second, the district must provide structures for the reform of these attitudes. Third, training in new skills must be provided, and finally, success must be rewarded. Once the benefits of active parental and community involvement in the schools become apparent, the barriers break down. (MD)

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ENRICHING EDUCATION IN THE COMMUNITY THROUGH PTA

by Robert I. Wakefield
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Delivered at the National PTA Convention
June 18, 1984

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In the past year, the nation's education system has been beleaguered by the reform movement. With A Nation at Risk and approximately 30 other commission reports published since 1983 requesting changes in education, educators are striving to make sense of these calls to reform. We are asking ourselves what concerns are valid and what concerns are simply rhetorical.

Most of the commission reports have focused on improving curriculum, moving to an extended school year or longer school days, reducing extracurricular activities, and other tangible items which could prove effective but add considerable expense to the educational process. And despite the good intentions of these commissions to refine education, one of the most vital and least expensive components for this reform is often -- and sometimes conspicuously -- neglected in their recommendations. That ingredient is community participation in the schools.

When asked about educational reform in a recent Chicago Tribune article, Jackson, Miss., school superintendent Robert Fortenberry emphasized this missing component. "It's absurd," he said, "to think you can create good policy without a reservoir of good will on the part of the teachers who are going to put that policy into practice. A lot of the reforms imposed a quarter of a century ago failed because the focus then was much too narrow, on curriculum alone. We seem to be making the same mistake again. The guts of real reform is (public involvement)."

With this in mind, I wish to discuss public involvement, particularly as it relates to the PTA and its interactions with a school district. Historically, educators often have perceived the PTA as strictly a "punch-and-cookies" auxiliary to the public schools. We in the Salt Lake City School District believe that perception negates the significance of the PTA, and we have on-going cooperation with the PTA that indicates we don't buy that philosophy. For the next few moments, I would like to give you three main beliefs our district fosters on collaboration with the PTA. I use the Salt Lake City School District as an example because of my familiarity with it; but I believe these philosophies can work in any district, if given the opportunity.

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The first philosophy is that **the PTA can provide valuable human resources to the public schools.** Granted, this is the traditional basis for relationships between any school district and its PTA, but we wholeheartedly foster this belief. Superintendent M. Donald Thomas practices an open door policy. He is as accessible to the PTA as to his administrative assistant. He understands well the fact that schools belong to the public, and the PTA is our best access to that public we serve. Therefore, we do everything possible to build our relationships with the PTA.

We actively incorporate the traditional services of the PTA to promote the district's volunteer efforts. In each of 27 elementary schools and nine secondary schools is a coordinator of volunteers. Elementary school coordinators are appointed by the school's PTA, which works closely with the district's office of volunteers to ensure maximum success in enriching regular school programs.

Gene T. Berry, Salt Lake City District's coordinator of volunteers and 1984-85 president of the National School Volunteer Program (NSVP), states that this relationship between the PTA and the volunteer office is mutually beneficial. "The PTA gives legitimacy to the volunteer effort," she says, "because many individuals will not volunteer to work with a school district, but they **will** offer their services to the PTA. In turn, the volunteer program helps the PTA obtain the critical linkages they need to work with the schools; it opens doors to senior citizens, students, and district support staff who otherwise may not be so readily available."

How well has this relationship worked? Since the district volunteer office was formed and began to work with the PTA, voluntary contributions to Salt Lake City schools have increased every year. In 1982-83, 17,000 volunteers contributed a total of 366,000 hours to the schools -- roughly equivalent to a staff of 20 individuals, each working 10-hour days every day school is in session. Using U.S. Department of Labor figures for "value added" to an organization through volunteerism, Ms. Berry calculated about $2 1/2 million in donated services to the district last year.

But since cold, hard facts are also cold and impersonal, consider for a moment one Phila Heimann, a former professor of German at the University of Utah. Mrs. Heimann was a native Austrian who had worked as a nuclear physicist before the advent of World War II and the Nazi regime. During the war, she barely managed to escape from Austria and came to the United States. After she retired from university teaching, she realized she had reached that venerable state often referred to as "the golden years." A local television commercial promoting motor homes invites people to spend the golden years either rockin' or rollin' -- but Mrs. Heimann chose to fill a void by volunteerin'. She volunteers regularly at Ensign Elementary, teaching students German and mathematics. She also travels to other schools around the district as a Living Historian, captivating students with personal stories about Austria, World War II, and her narrow escape. She loves these school experiences and says the volunteer service keeps her young. But she's not the only one who benefits -- the students adore her. One student sent her a letter which said, "my day is kind of gloomy, but when you come it makes it all worthwhile. I now want to study foreign language and learn how people in other countries live."

Marie Lundeen is a self-effacing yet kindly person in her 60s who works at the Utah State Department of Social Services during the day and goes home at night to an empty, lonely home minus even a telephone. While this lifestyle is difficult for her, she livens it by taking her monthly vacation time and walking to nearby Lincoln Elementary, where she spends hours tutoring third grade children in mathematics and reading. Marie said she experienced a tremendous thrill this year when she noticed that the test scores for her students skyrocketed mainly because of the personal attention she had given. Obviously, the students benefited enormously from her personal attention.

These people are mentioned because one of the real highlights of the district's volunteer effort is a program for senior volunteers, called SMILES -- Senior Motivators in Learning and Educational Services. The PTA cooperates enthusiastically with the district to make this program successful.

Every October, elementary school PTA's throughout the district carry out the much-needed legwork for an Older Neighbor and Grandparent Day. On this day, senior citizens from school neighborhoods visit the classrooms, watch student programs directly geared to them, and eat with the students. Last year, on the average, more than 100 older citizens visited every elementary school, and many said it was the highlight of their year. The students also anticipate this event each year. Truly inspiring is the interaction between the wisdom and love of age and the exuberance and awe of youth.

An incidental benefit of this day is the recruitment of many senior citizens to volunteer throughout the year. A retired English teacher, Hazel Ellison, works many hours to coordinate this great program and earns a meager half-time salary from community donations to continue the program from year to year. She says these senior citizens really love the children, and the children respond beautifully to the individual attention offered by these mature citizens who often have so much to give. Last year, the SMILES program received second place honors for "intergenerational programs" in a national award contest sponsored by Tupperware and the National School Volunteer Program. The University of Pittsburgh won the award with a program operating on a $250,000 budget. The SMILES program, by contrast, operates on a shoe string and bailing wire -- about $13,000.

The second belief our district adheres to is that **the PTA can participate in the decision making process.** This belief is supported by board policy through a system called shared governance, which provides the basis for virtually every program and activity the district conducts. In 1974, Dr. Thomas came to the district with an idea -- which seems to be what new superintendents have in abundance. That idea, in this instance, was a style of educational management where teachers and parents could cooperate directly with administrators to make proper decisions for their school through what is called a school community council. The idea appealed to the board of education, and was immediately adopted as policy. Dr. Thomas then faced a barrier in recruiting parents for these councils without offending the PTA, which had been performing well as the parental arm of the schools. He valued these PTA contributions and did not want to push aside the PTA, to relegate its importance by establishing councils which did not include its members. So he called several PTA leaders into his office and together they devised a scheme which works to this day. In each school, they decided, the PTA president and vice president would automatically sit on the council; then they, along with the school principal, would select three other individuals for the council, and those three, in turn, would select three additional individuals, making a total of about eight community members on the council. This organization of the councils emphasized the PTA's important role in the school.

The councils in each school also include representative faculty members. Thus all represented interests meet at least once a month to determine how the school will function on a daily basis. Of course, these councils are limited in their authority by educational legislation, board of education policies, and budgetary matters. But this is no more restrictive to local decision making power than it is to school administrators who make decisions on their own. These school councils assess needs and develop school goals for the year, evaluate disciplinary methods, and set daily schedules for the school such as when it will begin, when lunch will take place, and when it will end. They also devise strategies for home-school communications, organize extracurricular activities, and deal with community problems which may affect students.

Specific examples of the influence of these councils abound in Salt Lake City schools. Two years ago, for instance, one school was informed by district administration that it would have to lose a teacher because over the summer the student population had declined. The school's council and its PTA cooperated in gathering a large group of parents to meet with the administration about the matter. Parents filled the room as council members explained the unique needs of this particular school because of special programs contained therein. The council was so convincing that the administration changed its mind and retained the entire school staff.

In another example, in the early 1970's when portable walls and open classrooms were becoming popular, a school community council decided that the school could use portable walls. The council was ready to suggest this to the board of education, but after the decision was made one of the council members asked her daughter what she thought about portable walls. The answer surprised her: "I don't like portable walls; we already have one open classroom in the school, and in that class, I can't hear my teacher." Sufficiently alarmed, the parent reconvened the council to see if the members should reconsider. The council decided to poll the students, and the students opposed the portable walls by a 9-1 margin. Not only did the council overturn its original decision, but it also decided to get rid of the portable walls it already had and build permanent ones in their place. This example is used not to criticize portable walls but to show action one council took after hearing directly from students.

Undoubtedly, one may envision many problems in a school when decision making is widespread rather than being in the hands of one or two people. True, shared governance does have some drawbacks. Just like any system dealing with people, it is not perfect. In our councils decisions are made by consensus, and working through an issue until everyone agrees often takes much more time than when one person mandates. And while this is frustrating to some, there is overwhelming evidence that once a decision is made by consensus of the councils, support for that decision increases dramatically.

Scholars of shared governance emphasize that these systems carry many benefits. In a statement on shared control reprinted in an ERIC Report, Columbia University education professor Dale Mann tells principals that shared decision making results in goal achievement in four areas: (1) the parent's sense of increased control helps a child feel more control and effects a child's motivation to learn; thus the child's education is enhanced; (2) as neighborhood presence grows in terms of numbers, time, knowledgeability, and scope of involvement, it becomes likely that the school's responsiveness to the needs of the neighborhood will increase -- and the needs of the neighborhood will come to coincide more with the goals of the school; this ensures greater congruity between the school and the community; (3) people tend to approve what they have a hand in determining; when a person invests time and energy in something, there is a tendency to value it and to want to support it -- therefore, shared control increases support for the school; and (4) it is the value of our democratic society that those whose lives are affected by an institution should, in some fashion, participate in the control of that institution; when parents have that opportunity to participate, they feel better about the school because their democratic values are satisfied -- and that reason alone, says Mr. Mann, is sufficient to warrant and foster shared control.

Shared governance has worked well for Salt Lake City in the eleven years since its inception. While it is difficult to collect hard data to support parent and teacher involvement as factors for excellence in our schools, there are many indicators that this more intense involvement results in a higher

quality of education. Despite being virtually an inner-city district, our student standardized test scores have been significantly above the national norms every year. In 1983-84, our seventh and eighth grade cumulative scores were more than a year-and-a-half above the national norms. While teacher strikes are common in districts throughout the nation, Salt Lake City schools have not faced a teacher strike in more than 10 years.

Gallup polls since 1978 have shown a public confidence rating for schools of just over 30 percent, but in the spring of 1983 the Salt Lake community gave its schools a confidence rating of 46.5 percent. Parents with children in the schools gave a rating of 64 percent, twice that of the general populace! This survey of the Salt Lake community was based on the same questions to the public that are asked in the Gallup poll, and, incidentally, it was conducted with the help of dedicated members of the PTA.

The district's third belief is that **the PTA can make a difference in quality education.** Excellence in Education seems to be the latest buzzword in our nation, and perhaps rightfully so. We like to think our district has been striving for this excellence for many years. Nevertheless, we, too, were caught amidst the fury of **A Nation at Risk.** After all, when this report was published, the chairperson of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, David P. Gardner, lived right up the street from us in his role as president of the University of Utah.

So, naturally, when excellence became a top priority in Salt Lake City, district administration responded. In addition to calling in civic and business leaders to take a hard look at our district activities, we again called on the PTA for input from its members. This combination of business, civic and PTA leaders resulted in a district-wide council created by the board of education to "make a fearless review of the quality of education within the district." This was called, of course, the District Council on Excellence in Education. The commission spent several months examining district programs and activities, and the result was a 20-page booklet titled **The Basics and Beyond.** This booklet included such recommendations as compensating teachers on the basis of performance and load as well as experience; continuing to select principals on recommendations of shared governance committees chosen to meet the needs of schools; looking closely at the use of classroom instruction time; and informing the community that the principal responsibility for assuring the quality of each child's education rests with the parents or guardians.

In addition to this district council on excellence, the board of education formed mini-commissions on excellence in each school, and established this as a board goal for 1983-84. These mini-commissions are where the PTA really got involved in recommending quality reforms for our district. While the commissions were organized by the school community council, often they were loaded with PTA members who had been actively involved in the school over the past year or more. These mini-commissions studied **A Nation at Risk** and analyzed programs offered by their own schools, then made recommendations: to establish conditions in their school which would support excellence, to emphasize writing skills, to expand public involvement, and to establish conditions to minimize disruption of learning activities.

One area in which the PTA has been heavily involved in reform is the establishment of a career ladder system in our school district. In January 1984, the Utah State Legislature approved a budget for a statewide career ladder concept, but decided to leave the organization and implementation of career ladder programs to the individual districts. The only stipulation placed on the

school districts was that their career ladder systems must be developed with the equal participation of administrators, teachers, and parents. Most districts satisfied this requirement by having parents participate in early brainstorming committees to develop proposals, then discarding these parents in the implementation process. But the Salt Lake City School District has worked directly with city PTA leaders not only to initiate guidelines but also to carry out the proposals clear down to the school level.

Ours is a two-part program: the first consists of three extra calendar days in which teachers conduct parent-teacher conferences, inservice training, or curriculum development projects. The second is the establishment of 170 teacher leader positions. In addition to their regular classroom duties, these teacher leaders spend eight days working on their assigned tasks during the regular school calendar, and an additional 10 days in the completion of their extra functions. For this they each receive a stipend of $2,500. The encouraging aspect of parental participation here is that PTA representatives helped develop the proposal, helped develop and approve teacher leader position descriptions, and now sit on committees to actually select the teachers for these positions, both on a district level and in the individual schools. In addition, the school community councils have the responsibility of deciding what their schools will do on the extra three calendar days outlined in the proposal.

The final belief of the district is that **the PTA can positively influence the lives of children.** This influence surely occurs in most districts; thus, the Salt Lake City School District is no different in this regard. But I would like to give you some examples of how our PTA has really affected the lives of some students.

In the past several years, Salt Lake City has experienced an influx of refugees from the countries of Southeast Asia. Some of these individuals could already speak English and had associated with Americans during the Vietnam war -- thus it was not extremely difficult for them to find employment and become acclimated to the American way of life. Many, however, have had extreme hardships. The PTA in Washington Elementary, where many of these refugee children attend school, discovered that most of these children did not own even a pair of shoes. While this may not have been any different for these children than their situation in Asia, it can be agonizing to endure the harsh winters of Salt Lake City with no protection. The PTA initiated a shoe drive in which they bought new shoes or had nice used shoes donated for every needy refugee child in the school. This was a few years ago, but ever now, the PTA is still caring for the needs of some of these children.

In a more affluent neighborhood, an elementary school's PTA identified its student need as foreign languages. When PTA leaders approached administrators and learned that the district could not afford a foreign language program in the elementary schools, they decided to start their own. They gathered funds and hired certified teachers to come to the school early in the morning, before regular school hours, and teach foreign languages to interested students. The response was so overwhelming that soon the program spread to other elementary schools and the board of education took note. A district-wide committee to study foreign language programs for elementary schools was formed and in June, 1984, it reported to the board on the possibilities. Although sufficient funds still are unavailable for a full program, one of the district's career ladder positions will be strictly to establish elementary foreign language programs. The momentum for these courses is gaining strength every day, and it is largely due to the efforts of one school's PTA leaders.

The PTA organization makes a difference even in the high schools, where traditionally relationships between the PTA and the schools can be minimal. Last year, the PTA of Highland High School gathered enough money to offer two one-year, full-ride college scholarships to deserving students. While the trend among high school seniors nowadays is to steer away from education as a career, one of the students who received the full-ride scholarship is gladly choosing to pursue education as her career choice.

But the most exciting high school story of the year in Salt Lake City occurred at South High early in December. Due to a number of related factors -- declining high school enrollment in our inner-city district, an open enrollment policy causing an imbalance in student population among the four high schools, and a desire of some board members to free up more money for distribution to needed educational programs -- the board of education studied the possibility of closing a high school. South High, our inner city school, was suffering from a poor reputation among parts of the community, and many considered it the school most likely to be closed. Despite this community perception, however, the board had not indicated which school, if any, would be closed; so uncertainty reigned throughout the city. The board decided to hold a public hearing at each of our high schools on successive evenings in December, and at those meetings ask the communities to discuss the pros and cons of closing their particular school. An average of 250 people attended each of the three other meetings, which, not surprisingly, were polite but intense.

When time came for the South High School hearing, more than 1200 individuals showed up. The school chorus sang as board members walked into the auditorium and students distributed "I love South" buttons. Board members were visibly moved by the atmosphere, and rather than being tense like the other meetings, the occasion was not unlike a pep rally. Nevertheless, the student leaders who spoke were polite and respectful. Later we learned that the occasion had been orchestrated by a well-meaning teacher leader and the principal -- and a telephone bank organized by the PTA to encourage community members to attend. South High alumni who had not visited the school for years came back to support their old school.

So what were the results of this support? The board decided not to close any high school because of the overwhelming public response, and just last week South High was selected by the United States Department of Education as one of the nation's 200 Schools of Excellence. Why was South selected? Because the judges who came to Salt Lake City were impressed with school discipline, with a democratic project the school maintains on a grant from the Danforth Foundation, and with significant parental involvement.

So, these are the four items, once again, our district believes are important for a good relationship with the PTA: (1) the PTA can participate in the decision making process; (2) the PTA can provide valuable human resources to schooling; (3) the PTA can make a difference in quality education; and (4) the PTA can positively touch the lives of students. The Salt Lake City School District has actively fostered these principles, and as a result the relationship between the district and the PTA has helped provide a quality education for the youth of Salt Lake City.

The element most difficult to overcome in obtaining parental involvement is damaging traditional attitudes about the roles of parents in the schools. Traditionally educators see themselves as the professionals with all the answers, and they see parents as lay persons who don't know much about schools. Parents reinforce these attitudes when they refer to themselves by

saying, "We're just parents; what do we know?" Parents have much to offer, and can make a difference in the schools. Four things are necessary to revise these traditional attitudes about parental roles in the schools:

(1) Articulate the philosophy of cooperation. Salt Lake City residents know that parent and community involvement are valued in the schools. This philosophy is written in board policy and supported by board goals. Each year, every administrator, principal and teacher develops an accountability statement related to these goals. In addition, written materials are frequently distributed about the philosophy. Some recent examples are "So you Won't be in the Dark," a PTA publication; "Parents Have Rights, Too," a PDK fastback by Dr. Thomas; and "Shared Governance: Active Cooperation for a More Effective Education," a training manual published in the Superintendent's Office.

(2) Provide structures for the reform of attitudes. The previously discussed system of shared governance is one of the vital structures used in the Salt Lake City schools. Part of this structure includes open disclosure, appeal procedures for those who feel they have been wronged by the system, and teacher and peer evaluation. These are all designed to open the system to critical scrutiny and evaluation so that improvements can be made. It is a dynamic and ever-changing process. And if shared governance is our basis for attitudinal reform, the volunteer program provides one of the vehicles through which this reform takes place.

(3) Provide training to develop new skills. In a process so evolving as shared governance, we conduct staff and community training sessions constantly. Training is offered to teachers -- with university credit attached -- in consensus building, council procedures, and working with volunteers. Parents and other members of the councils often are invited to participate in these sessions. We also provide training in building communications skills and in developing home-school relationships.

(4) Reward successes. When community involvement works in our schools the results are shared and celebrated. Test scores above the national average, high attendance levels, and volunteer participation are all reported and praised in our district.

Once the benefits of active parental and community involvement in the schools become ingrained in administrators and teachers, the traditional barriers begin to break down. Parents who are critical of schools no longer are viewed as threats; rather, their criticism is accepted as an important point of view. This entire process of self examination and critical review is considered healthy. With attitudinal changes such as these, the relationship between the PTA and a local school district can begin to flourish. In this condition, educational reform advances beyond rhetoric into meaningful action and subsequent achievement. And, once again, as Superintendent Robert Fortenberry proclaimed, "the guts of real reform is shared governance" and public participation.